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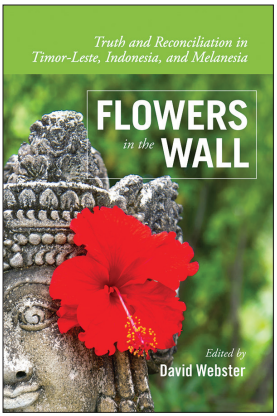

FLOWERS IN THE WALL
Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste, Indonesia, and Melanesia
by David Webster

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Reconciliation, Church, and Peacebuilding

Jess Agustin

Surreal is the word that I always use when I describe my experiences in East Timor. It is a tiny country, a tiny territory, but it has everything, both the negative and the positive. It is surreal in the sense that Canadians can now meet with the heroes and heroines of the independence movement. It is hard to believe that this is true when the Canadian government said for many years that East Timor was a lost cause, unrealistic, an illusory dream. Yet here we are: there is a country called East Timor.

This chapter provides some context to understand the role of the Catholic Church in East Timor and in international support for East Timor. The church's role has been very complex, and it is full of paradoxes, tensions, and contradictions.

My aim is to capture and describe the tools, the strategies, and the means by which the church played its role in the Timorese struggle. It was an institution that was part of a broad-based social movement, but one that also interacted both with the state and state actors, and with civil society and the market. I illustrate with references to my own experiences coordinating East Timor work for the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace (henceforth Development and Peace), beginning in the 1980s.[1]

I came into Development and Peace totally ignorant of East Timor. Then, when Elaine Briere, founder of the East Timor Alert Network, came all the way from Vancouver to meet me in Montreal, she insisted that my first mission should be in East Timor. It was worse than Cambodia, she insisted. I thought then that this must be an exaggeration.

In the early 1980s only a couple of NGOs operated in East Timor. The country was isolated and foreigners were restricted. Development and Peace was among the first that set foot in East Timor. It was easy for me to enter the territory because I look Indonesian, but then later, on my third or fourth day in East Timor, I was followed by Indonesian agents. I tried to meet with Catholic bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo, who had just recently been appointed as apostolic administrator, but he refused to meet with me. Eventually on my last day, the late Bishop Ricardo, who was then the vicar general, met with me in an almost clandestine way. He apologized and told me that Bishop Belo suspected that I was an Indonesian intelligence agent. For about a couple of hours he narrated to me the horror of Indonesian military abuses and pleaded with me to spread the word to the world.

In Development and Peace, I am sometimes called Forrest Gump because every time I go to East Timor, something significant happens. During the first Bali bombing, I was there. When the pro-Indonesia militia launched their first attack in the Timorese capital of Dili in 1999, I arrived while they were having a blood ceremony in front of the governor's house, drinking the blood of a dog. Then they started attacking those former pro-integration figures who had betrayed them. I, along with Father Domingo, who had attempted to rescue some people, was almost killed by the militia. We witnessed the fact that the attack was not simply the work of a rogue militia with machetes and homemade guns, as was often depicted by Indonesian newspapers, but in fact the Indonesian military directing the Dili rampage while discreetly supplying heavy weapons later during the night. I was also there when General Wiranto came to sign the agreement on the cessation of violence. Bishops Belo and Basilio do Nascimiento asked me to be there. I felt that it was surreal to see Wiranto, who had so much blood on his hands, there in the bishop's house. The church, still quite innocent, wanted to sign an agreement for the cessation of violence, so we contacted experts on canon law. Immediately we were told, and advised Bishop Belo: "Don't sign it because you cannot enforce it if one of the parties violates the agreement."

7.1: Jess Agustin (right) with Bishop Carlos Belo, Dili, Timor-Leste. Photo courtesy of Jess Agustin.

East Timor is still in transition and the church is definitely still in transition, but when it comes to peace and reconciliation, Timor-Leste is much farther ahead compared to the Philippines or Indonesia. There was no truth and reconciliation in the Philippines after the end of the Marcos dictatorship and the same is true of post-Suharto Indonesia. There were some reparations, and some of the money stolen by the Marcos dictatorship was returned, but there was no recovery of the memory of exactly what happened during the period of martial law. No wonder members of the Marcos family are still in positions of power.

The best way to explain the church's delicate and even complex role in East Timor is to locate it within three wider circles: the institutional Catholic Church; pro-independence and pro-integration movements in East Timor; and finally the nexus of state, civil society, and market.

We can locate the Timorese Catholic Church in the wider institutional church, including the Vatican and the Indonesian Bishops' Conference (KWI). Bishop Belo, like Bishop Martinho da Costa Lopes before him, was an apostolic administrator. They were not bishops of East Timor in name, but only administrators of the diocese. Technically, Bishop Belo was the bishop of an obscure town in Italy called Lorium, and in Dili, he was an apostolic administrator on behalf of the pope, whose titles included Bishop of Dili. Part of the reason for this was to neutralize the KWI. A number of bishops then accepted as a fait accompli the Indonesia occupation of East Timor and the fact that the church in East Timor was part of the KWI. Due

to the Vatican's decision to administer the East Timor diocese directly, the bishop in Dili would attend the KWI gatherings, but only as an observer.

During the struggle for independence the Timorese church was still rather feudal. Since they were isolated, many priests acted like they were lords. This is why in East Timor priests are called "Amo," meaning "my lord." Even with the reforms of Vatican II in the 1960s, priests remained dominant figures in East Timor. But gradually the Timorese church became an important part of the Timorese self-determination movement. It represented a space for dissent, a shield against human rights violations, and a voice for the people. Its role was not only to promote independence, but also to play a behind-the-scenes role to try to uphold the people's rights, not just in terms of being pro-integration or pro-independence, but also in the actual reconciliation process, to try to bring various people and leaders together. It played this role within the Timorese independence movement, seeking to reconcile its various factions, and later searching for a balance between reconciliation and justice. Just before the 1999 referendum, the church initiated an All-inclusive Intra-East Timorese Dialogue, followed by the Dare 1 and Dare 2 dialogue processes supported by the international community. Development and Peace was very much a part of this initiative to bring the pro-integration, pro-autonomy, and pro-independence groups together in a low-profile manner. To a certain extent, that process was succeeding until the sudden announcement that a referendum might take place, as it did in 1999.

It was the church and Bishop Belo who actually framed the whole discussion, saying that it was not simply about Indonesia occupying East Timor, with all the brutality the occupation entailed, but also a matter of offering the people a democratic option in the referendum. When Bishop Belo called for a referendum, the counter offer was for a gradual transition: releasing political prisoners, then establishing an autonomous government, and finally holding a referendum. With the downfall of Suharto, however, the whole process was accelerated.

The church had also been very much a part of Timorese social movements. There was a sense that after decades of isolation, Timorese were part of an international community. Bishop Belo articulated concerns over human rights in 1989 in a letter to the secretary-general of the United Nations. Timorese, including the Timorese church, were able to communicate with solidarity movements all over the world. There was an informal

committee, mostly solidarity supporters within the international church, that operated very discreetly in Australia, in Canada, in Europe and elsewhere. We had our own lobbyist in Washington, DC, Arnold Kohen, who went on to be Bishop Belo's official biographer.[2]

The church was attempting a balancing act between the idea of Christendom, where the church is leading the people and very much part of the state, and the idea of the church as completely outside the secular world. There is a tension between the idea of the church as a revolutionary force (expressed in Latin American liberation theology), and the church as purely concerned with morals, uninvolved in politics, and exclusively religious. The Timorese church was able to sustain this balancing act during the Indonesian occupation. However, after the restoration of independence in 2002, and the emergence of a new and well-funded civil society, the church underwent a crisis of identity as it suddenly ceased to be the leading institution in the country.

Because I was seconded to work for Caritas Australia for two years, I was very much part of the reflection within the church as it tried to discover its proper role between being a servant church or a dominant institution, directing and leading the transition to a new country. What would be the role of the church in terms of the new constitution and the structure of the new government? There was a suggestion to create a council to advise the president, with the church as a permanent member of that council. Again the advice was that the church could not be part of the state, that it could not lead another strong movement as it had during the independence struggle. It should be a servant church, and the church should accompany civil society in the consolidation of democracy and peace and in building a just society, and in supporting the growing movement rather than being a principal institution promoting its own agenda. This was the view provided by Cardinal Orlando Quevedo when we invited him to share his experience from the Philippines, where the church had played a key role in the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship and the subsequent transition to democracy.

A collection of Bishop Belo's speeches and lectures from the period right after the referendum outlines exactly what the church's role is, even today.[3] During the period of the restoration of independence, the Timorese church became more of a traditional church, pushing the new state not to remove Catholic elements from the education system. There was a push

to ban abortion, and the church stood against reproductive health and family planning. Many people attributed the Timorese church's sudden decision to stress "moral" issues and to de-emphasize the social aspect to the pervasive conservative tendencies within the Catholic hierarchy in the Vatican. Development and Peace was a victim of that global shift: it was accused of being too progressive and it eventually had its funding cut by Stephen Harper's Conservative government, which affected its East Timor program.

The Timorese church's historic position within social movements affected its response to the *Chega!* report. In East Timor, there was a lukewarm reaction to the report. Right after the restoration of independence, Bishop Belo decided to resign as bishop of Dili. One reason was that he was very disappointed that the Vatican did not immediately open an apostolic nunciature, the Vatican equivalent of an embassy, in East Timor. (It decided instead that it would continue its representation in Jakarta.) It took a further nine to ten years for the Vatican to decide to establish an apostolic mission in East Timor. There was also a clear order from the Roman Curia of Pope Benedict XVI not to be involved in politics and to focus more on moral issues. Ironically, this provoked widespread distress within the church and among the Timorese population: the church was no longer speaking about issues of justice and peace at a time when political leaders were debating the socio-economic direction of the new country. When the church suddenly withdrew from social debates and became more concerned with selective moral issues, the people, especially women's groups, started to assert themselves. They were less afraid of the church hierarchy and they openly challenged the church's policies, particularly on the issue of women's rights. Timorese civil society's disappointment in the church's shift represents a tension on the part of the Timorese church as the country consolidates its democratic institutions and its people become more aware of their rights.

The Timorese church is highly influenced by the Vatican. Pope Francis's impact on the Catholic Church in general has tended to bring it back towards greater involvement in issues like poverty, corruption, inequality, and violence, and a greater engagement with movements for social change. Pope Francis's reform of the church will definitely have an impact in East Timor, creating a space for the local church to push more for the implementation of some of the *Chega!* recommendations. With Pope Francis at

the helm, this is an excellent opportunity to follow up on truth and reconciliation in East Timor.

We should look at *Chega!* not so much as a report, but as the culmination of a process. The Timorese church played a leading role in peacebuilding over the last few decades by trying to create a culture of peace, especially among pro-Indonesian Timorese and the various political factions vying for power. It has been a long process, and it will take more time still. The violence that broke out in East Timor in 2006, creating many internally displaced people, is a heartbreaking reminder that peace is still fragile in this new country. East Timor still suffers from poverty and it is one of the world's most traumatized countries. The healing process takes time. They say that to be considered traumatized you have to experience at least three traumatic events. The Timorese have suffered many more than that. A healing process in which the church—itself also deeply wounded—can continue to play a key role, is still a pressing need. Creating a culture of peace, after all, is a significant part of the healing process.

Notes

1 On the work of Development and Peace in East Timor, see David Webster, "Canadian Catholics and the East Timor Struggle, 1975–99," *Historical Studies* 75 (2009): 63–82. On the role of the Timorese church under Indonesian rule, see Patrick A. Smythe, *"The Heaviest Blow": The Catholic Church and the East Timor Issue* (Münster, DE: LIT Verlag, 2004).

2 Arnold Kohen, *From the Place of the Dead: The Epic Struggles of Bishop Belo of East Timor* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

3 Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, *The Road to Freedom: A Collection of Speeches, Pastoral Letters, and Articles from 1997–2001* (Sydney: Caritas Australia, 2001).